

Information on Listeriosis



What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

A person with listeriosis has fever, muscle aches, and sometimes gastrointestinal symptoms such as nausea or diarrhea. If infection spreads to the nervous system, symptoms such as headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or convulsions can occur. Infected pregnant women may experience only a mild, flu-like illness; however, infections during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage or stillbirth, premature delivery, or infection of the newborn.

How great is the risk for listeriosis?

In the United States, an estimated 2,500 persons become seriously ill with listeriosis each year. Of these, 500 die. At increased risk are:

- Pregnant women - They are about 20 times more likely than other healthy adults to get listeriosis. About one-third of listeriosis cases happen during pregnancy.
- Newborns - Newborns rather than the pregnant women themselves suffer the serious effects of infection in pregnancy.
- Persons with weakened immune systems
- Persons with cancer, diabetes, or kidney disease
- Persons with AIDS - They are almost 300 times more likely to get listeriosis than people with normal immune systems.
- Persons who take glucocorticosteroid medications
- The elderly

Healthy adults and children occasionally get infected with *Listeria*, but they rarely become seriously ill.

How does *Listeria* get into food?

Listeria monocytogenes is found in soil and water. Vegetables can become contaminated from the soil or from manure used as fertilizer. Animals can carry the bacterium without appearing ill and can contaminate foods of animal origin such as meats and dairy products.

Listeria is killed by pasteurization and cooking; however, in certain ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs and deli meats, contamination may occur after cooking but before packaging.

How do you get listeriosis?

You get listeriosis by eating food contaminated with *Listeria*. Babies can be born with listeriosis if their mothers eat contaminated food during pregnancy.

Can listeriosis be prevented?

The general guidelines recommended for the prevention of listeriosis are similar to those used to help prevent other foodborne illnesses, such as salmonellosis.

How can you reduce your risk for listeriosis?

General recommendations:

- Thoroughly cook raw food from animal sources, such as beef, pork, or poultry.
- Wash raw vegetables thoroughly before eating.
- Keep uncooked meats separate from vegetables and from cooked foods and ready-to-eat foods.
- Avoid unpasteurized (raw) milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk.
- Wash hands, knives, and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods.
- Consume perishable and ready-to-eat foods as soon as possible.

How can you reduce your risk for listeriosis?

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Recommendations for persons at high risk, such as pregnant women and persons with weakened immune systems, in addition to the recommendations listed above:

- Do not eat hot dogs, luncheon meats, or deli meats, unless they are reheated until steaming hot.
- Avoid getting fluid from hot dog packages on other foods, utensils, and food preparation surfaces, and wash hands after handling hot dogs, luncheon meats, and deli meats.
- Do not eat soft cheeses such as feta, Brie, and Camembert, blue-veined cheeses, or Mexican-style cheeses such as queso blanco, queso fresco, and Panela, unless they have labels that clearly state they are made from pasteurized milk.
- Do not eat refrigerated pâtés or meat spreads. Canned or shelf-stable pâtés and meat spreads may be eaten.
- Do not eat refrigerated smoked seafood, unless it is contained in a cooked dish, such as a casserole. Refrigerated smoked seafood, such as salmon, trout, whitefish, cod, tuna or mackerel, is most often labeled as "nova-style," "lox," "kippered," "smoked," or "jerky." The fish is found in the refrigerator section or sold at deli counters of grocery stores and delicatessens. Canned or shelf-stable smoked seafood may be eaten.

How do you know if you have listeriosis?

There is no routine screening test for susceptibility to listeriosis during pregnancy, as there is for rubella and some other congenital infections. If you have symptoms such as fever or stiff neck, consult your doctor.

What should you do if you've eaten a food recalled because of *Listeria* contamination?

The risk of an individual person developing *Listeria* infection after consumption of a contaminated product is very small. If you have eaten a contaminated product and do not have any symptoms, we do not recommend that you have any tests or treatment, even if you are in a high-risk group. However, if you are in a high-risk group, have eaten the contaminated product, and within 2 months become ill with fever or signs of serious illness, you should contact your physician and inform him or her about this exposure.

Can listeriosis be treated?

When infection occurs during pregnancy, antibiotics given promptly to the pregnant woman can often prevent infection of the fetus or newborn.

Even with prompt treatment, some infections result in death. This is particularly likely in the elderly and in persons with other serious medical problems.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, June 14, 2006

If you have additional questions, please call your doctor or local health department.

Central District Health Department

www.cdhd.idaho.gov

Central District Health Department
707 N. Armstrong Place
Boise, ID 83704
208-327-8625

Valley County Office
703 N. First Street
McCall, ID 83638
208-634-7194

Elmore County Office
520 E. 8th Street N.
Mountain Home, ID 83647
208-587-4407